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ABSTRACT

This study examines the question of students as context for what happens in school and the ways in which educators' subjective interpretations of the realities students bring with them to school influence every aspect of the school environment. The focus is on contemporary, nontraditional students whose academic backgrounds, families, values, or life circumstances differ from those of traditional students. Utilizing interviews and observational techniques, the study demonstrates how teachers working in different settings view the "same" student in dramatically different ways and construct different conceptions of students as learners. Findings suggest that different constructions of students within and between schools challenges the coherence of education policy. Today's teachers were not, for the most part, trained to work with today's students, and teachers who feel little support for constructing new responses to students or for rethinking classroom routines from the perspectives of today's students are more likely to persist in orthodox conceptions of pedagogy, underestimating the abilities of both contemporary students and teachers. (LL)

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF STUDENTS: CHALLENGES TO POLICY COHERENCE

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Stanford University
June 1992

INTRODUCTION: STUDENTS AS CONTEXTS OF TEACHING

Policymakers, concerned citizens, and critics of the public education system center discussions and debates about the nation's schools on students. In particular, the level and quality of American students' academic performance fuel concerns that the nation will be unable to retain its competitive position in global markets and students' futures as citizens, workers, parents and members of a community. These conversations, taking place in such places as state capitals, local school boards, grocery stores, corporate board rooms, and legislative chambers tend to the bottom-line. Students are construed as "outputs," products of America's schools and classrooms.

Teachers' conversations about students differ markedly from these bottom-line discussions in the education policy system and the community at large. Teachers' perspective and concerns about students center on students as "inputs," as the context for teaching and learning. The students who enter their classrooms bring with them attitudes, abilities, backgrounds, assumptions, life circumstances, and perspectives that matter fundamentally to how teachers conceive their professional tasks and how they go about the business of teaching.

This teacher perspective of students as "context" has not received a great deal of attention in the literature on teaching or educational research on schools and instruction. In process-product models of teaching and input-output models of school effects, students are conceived as the objects of educational "treatments," rather than as contexts which shape teaching practice and school organization.

This distinction between student as product and student as context of teaching matters enormously to our understanding of classrooms because the former directs attention to how students perform and away from what teachers do in response to the attitudes, behavior, competencies and circumstances that students bring with them to the classroom.

By teachers' report, students comprise the most salient aspect of their workplace. Student factors frame teachers' work, their conceptions of teaching and learning, and so in turn influence fundamentally student outcomes. But our several years of observation and interviews in diverse secondary school settings show that teachers' thoughts about, and responses to,

the young people sitting in their classrooms encompass two importantly different phenomena.

One facet of teachers' views about their students has to do with the objective reality of student factors. Factors such as language and culture, racial background, parents' economic and educational resources and other family circumstances, academic ability and background present particular demands on teachers' instructional choices and classroom strategies. Students who come to class with scant proficiency in English, for example, present constraints and challenges to high school teachers radically different from those presented by their native-born peers reading and writing English at or beyond grade-level. Students whose parents follow carefully their progress in school bring resources to the classroom that are missing for their peers from zero-parent families or whose parents are indifferent or uninvolved in their education. These differences in the objective realities of students' backgrounds and life circumstances have implications for their educational needs.

A second aspect of teachers' perspectives on students has to do with the meaning of these objective facts, or the subjective reality they comprise for teachers. Most particularly, while the so-called "traditional student" -- a white youngster from a middle class family with conventional aspirations for college and career -- are seen similarly by many teachers, non-traditional students -- young people from ethnic or racial minority cultures, from dysfunctional or nontraditional families, from disintegrating and often violent neighborhoods; young people engaged in peer cultures where substance abuse, early and unprotected sex, dangerous or illegal peer activities -- are seen differently among teachers.

An important observation of our Center's research in diverse school settings is that a school-is-not-a-school-is-not-a-school from the students' vantage point (Davidson, 1992; Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992 as examples). Even the micro-climates of departments within schools represent significantly different educational environments and support substantially different educational experiences and outcomes for students who, objectively, are similar (Siskin, 1992). Our data suggest that this is because teachers' subjective perception of today's students, of non-traditional students, varies enormously on such critical dimensions as assumptions about academic abilities and interests, possible futures, and quality as a learner. Teachers offer strategically different explanations for their students' uneven attendance, short attention spans or low levels of academic engagement or achievement, undone homework, or basic skills deficiencies.

These subjective constructions of students matter enormously to students, because they impact the ways in which teachers

structure their pedagogy and curriculum. Bluntly put, some teachers see non-traditional students as drains on the system, not worthy of time, attention, or respect; still others see them as people of value, and endeavor to understand and meet their needs. Yet a third group recognizes their strengths which others fail to see and build upon them.

In short, the student "outcomes" or the bottom-line of such concern to policymakers and the public turns to a significant degree on how student is construed and constructed in contemporary schools and classrooms. Teachers' subjective interpretations of students' objective circumstances turns to a significant degree on the norms, values and character of the up-close school-level or department community to which they belong.

This paper takes up the question of students as context for what happens in school, and the ways in which educators' subjective interpretations of the realities students bring with them to school influence every aspect of the school environment. We focus on non-traditional students, that is, students whose academic backgrounds, families, values, or life circumstances differ from those of traditional students. We take this focus because we believe these students -- contemporary students -- present an immediate and unmet challenge and underused resource for the public schools. Further, we believe that the experiences of contemporary students highlight the significance for teaching and learning of features that have long characterized the nation's schools. The press of today's students on the system simply amplifies them and their consequences for students.

First we describe the objective conditions of today's students that impact the school and classroom. We then illustrate the diverse subjective interpretations teachers can construct of these student features, particularly their academic strengths and weaknesses. Using interviews and observations, we show how teachers working in different settings view the "same" student in dramatically different ways and so construct fundamentally different conceptions of similar students as learners and as possible selves in the classroom.

Finally, we argue that these different constructions of "student" have little to do with different formal aspects of the school and much to do with the character of the professional community that defines the school (or department) culture. These different constructions of students within and between schools, we believe, ultimately challenge the coherence of education policy in terms of its expected or hoped-for consequences for students. Similar policies, or bundles of policies, will affect students differently depending on the contexts in which they are interpreted and carried out.

CONTEMPORARY STUDENTS: OBJECTIVE REALITIES

Teachers agree not only that students are the context of greatest salience but that changes in today's students, or the ways in which they differ from traditional [and some would say idealized] students of the past and often not-so-distant-past, leaves them feeling ill-prepared and uncertain about how to proceed in their classrooms and leads them to question their professional efficacy with contemporary students. Hardly an aspect of school setting, rhythm, or activities remain untouched by the changed realities of today's students.

Across our secondary school sites, veteran teachers comment that the students they teach today differ in important ways from the students of twenty, fifteen, or even five years ago. Today's students bring different cultures and languages to school, bring different attitudes and supports to the classrooms, and are required to navigate competing pressures of family, peers, and community at the same time they function as students (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992).

The first thing teachers mention in discussing today's student and their relationship with school is the negative consequences of <u>changed family structure</u>.

A Michigan teacher believes:

> ...the biggest change [in today's students] is that there is a lot less support from home...not just here but across the country...a lot of kids have very little support at home, a lot of single parents...we have a lot of kids who don't even live at home...the biggest change is in family structure...these kids just don't have the things [in terms of family supports] the kids used to have.

A California social studies teacher advises:

> You gotta be sensitive to changes in society, and how they're affecting kids, you know, what they're coming in to. For example, I never say "Well, tell your parents" anymore because when you say "parents" you've closed down 75% of these kids. If they like you and respect your opinion, it makes them feel like "God, I'd better not tell him I live with my auntie, or a single parent, or someone else." A lot of people aren't aware of it.

Public school teachers feel the dysfunctional consequences of today's changed family structures most acutely. "Homelife," according to many public school teachers, is the crux of the difficulties they encounter with today's students. Teachers tell of neglect, abuse, violence, and tragedy as daily events in the lives of many of their students. In the course of our field

work, we heard from students about molestation, murder, drug and alcohol addiction, violence, economic stress, serious illness, suicides, and physical neglect -- life circumstances with which their teachers had little or no experience and usually little knowledge. But these worries, pressures, and pain came to school and competed with teachers' efforts to engage, motivate, and teach.

Concern about lack of parental support appears as another, related issue for many of today's students. Parents besieged by any number of the pressures experienced by today's families -- unstable domestic situations, inadequate income, bleak job prospects, lack of support for child rearing, joblessness, homelessness -- have little time or energy or sometimes taste for involvement in their youngsters' school life. Issues of cultural difference or conceptions of "establishment" power also inhibit parental involvement (Fine, 1991). But, besides lack of active support, parental attitudes about school frustrate many teachers. A math teacher deeply committed to her non-traditional students told us:

> Parents fight us too on homework and spending time on school. For example, one father came to a back-to-school night and said, "Is it just because all of these kids are so dumb that they get homework on weekends, is it just because you are mean you make them work on weekends?" The attitude that we have weekends off, we don't think on weekends, means that the weekend begins on Thursday, because half of them don't come on Fridays. So it is more than just an uphill climb.

Parents who themselves are alienated from school or other mainstream institutions can provide little of the support that teachers expect from traditional families. A biology teacher frustrated over her inability to make contact with parents -- unreturned phone calls, notes, missed conferences -- feels she is alone in her attempts to work with many students. Or that even when she is able to reach someone at home, support is not available:

> A lot of times I contact the home and the home is completely apathetic or unable, dysfunctionally unable, to intervene [or provide support].

Lack of parental involvement in homework, school affairs, or, more generally, the high school careers of their children shows up in undone homework, apathy about school, and insufficient support for student efforts, teachers say. Students from families with limited or no English speaking adults face additional challenges.

> The girl you just saw? She's like most of the kids in my [science] class [in terms of parental support]. She is getting a low grade and she is concerned. And she felt like nobody cared what she got anymore. She went on and on, using bad language about her father -- something is wrong there. And her mom used to help her [before they immigrated], but can't anymore, because she really doesn't speak English. She feels all alone.

Relations with parents of contemporary students differ for other reasons from those many secondary school teachers have experienced in the past. For some parent groups, especially newly arrived Asian immigrants, "going to school" falls out of the bounds of cultural appropriateness. These parents decline to involve themselves in their children's educational affairs, or in traditional school-parent interchanges, not because of lack of concern and support for school, but because of cultural norms. And the parents of youngsters participating in a school busing program also find it problematic to trudge across town for evening activities, for sports events, or other school affairs. The consequence of the changed parent-school relations associated with contemporary students, teachers observe, is erosion of the kind of parent spirit and participation seen in the past.

Policies that bring students to the school campus affect the nature of students', as well as parents', participation in the school community. Schools whose students ride buses across town as part of an effort to integrate the district's schools find that the "tyranny of the bus schedule" erodes the community built by participation in extra-curricular events. Neither students nor their parents travel across town to attend evening or weekend events; students tied to bus schedules [which become increasingly tight as district budgets shrink] find it difficult if not impossible to stay after school for practices or activities. Sports teams, performing arts groups, and music ensembles are affected by students' interests and talents, but also by the bus schedules and difficulty of engaging in extra-curricular affairs. The discouraged head of a music department remarked that his program essentially had collapsed with the student transportation problems associated with desegregation; students couldn't come to practices and their parents did not come to performances. The drama chair in another school told the same story. The fracturing of school community, as defined in the past around extracurricular activities, was evident to teachers in all CRC sites where students were drawn district-wide, rather than from a neighborhood community. Busing schedules also make if difficult for students most in need of extra attention to stay after school, or to come early, for tutoring sessions.

<u>Family mobility and student transience</u> present serious problems for today's youth and their teachers. Children of both

affluent and poor families are affected by high levels of mobility typical in American society. A teacher in a Michigan school particularly troubled by high student mobility commented that some of the seats in his classroom had been occupied by three different students over a two-week period. Another stressed the frustration of this lack of stability in a class:

> You know, you just pass out a book and get this kid started, and two days later this one is gone and another comes in and says "where are we?"...you just can't ever catch up with all of them.

Student transiency related to poor attendance is a "student problem" raised most frequently [and most passionately] by public school teachers. Teachers in all public CRC secondary schools report that "attendance is horrendous." The frustration of a Michigan English teacher about failed lesson plans and incomplete work captures the sentiments we heard from teachers in all our sites:

> ...no one yet has figured out how do a process [of developing a writing project for publication] with kids who are here for a day or two and then gone for a day or two...it is difficult in all literature classes to teach kids who are just not here.

A California science teacher, exhausted by her efforts to keep all her students on track, describes how absenteeism exponentially increases her work load:

> So part of the load is just the course itself..If all I had to do was to teach a course to students who were here every day, I would be very busy. And on top of that is student absenteeism, and then there are students who are present who need a lot of special attention. What happens if a student misses the first few assignments? I try to remind them whenever I can -- lots of notes, every night I am writing little Post-its to remind students, and you just keep at it. And those things take an awful lot of time. I mean if all I had to do was keep up with day-to-day stuff that would be plenty, but I've got a student working on stuff from two months ago, and other students from several weeks ago, and other students...and they're all in different stages. So that absenteeism has been a horrible drain.

Teachers also point to ways in which the <u>academic backgrounds and skills</u> of today's students differ importantly from those of students in the past. A uniform complaint about today's adolescents, especially among public school teachers, was decline in taste for or skill in reading. Students in high

school today typically spend little time with books and have little interest in reading. Teachers report that this feature of today's student shows up in the weak general knowledge students bring to class as well as their unwillingness or inability to read difficult (or lengthy) texts. Furthermore, a number of teachers agree with this math teacher's complaint: "Too many students today just don't like to think."

Significant shifts in student demographics and language backgrounds, particularly in California and other "border" states, presents significant challenges for secondary school teachers. Today's classrooms are occupied by students with diverse cultural backgrounds and language skills in both first language and English. And in many schools, demographic changes in student body composition have been swift. Faculty at one of our sites have in little more than two years seen their student body change from predominately white, middle class to a student population in which approximately one-third have only limited English proficiency and close to one-half come from poor families.

Students with limited or no proficiency in English have problems with reading and writing of a different kind than do mainstream students with low reading achievement. And many schools and classrooms contain students from a wide diversity of language origins. Further, LEP and NEP students from the same language background can and do differ radically from one another in skills in their native language and in academics. California teachers in our study are overwhelmed by the cultures and languages that fill their classrooms, changes that have been swift and for which they have not been prepared. One teacher estimated that in her district (Mostaza) in 1990, one out of four students were LEP/NEP; projections for the year 2000 bring that ratio to one in two students enrolled in the district's schools. These fundamental shifts in student demographics occurred with breathtaking speed and require significant shifts in curricula. She observes:

> The change has been phenomenal. Five years ago we were not under court order. Five years ago, we were 6-8% minority; Today we are about 56% nonwhite, so it is a significant change and it has been rapid....In each of the two classes you observed, there's probably five -- no, more like ten -- who don't speak English. It used to be that you'd teach advanced mathematics courses because nearly everybody was going to college. Now it is much more basic.

Further, teachers comment that students often "pass out" of bilingual or sheltered English classes before they are competent to handle regular classroom demands. One science teacher remarks:

> The two physiology classes are the only ones I have in which students can read or write. In my two regular biology classes, nobody speaks English. There are about ten different languages in those classes.

A biology teacher in another California school notes:

> [pointing to students in the classroom] Now those kids really have no grasp of the English language, they really don't. But they are high enough so they pass the test [to move from sheltered classes]. But what do you do with them when they don't know English? Or like Juan there: he's an 11th grader, but he can't read. This [biology] text is written at about a 7th grade level. These students do not understand this textbook; they do not understand it. Their reading level is awful and their vocabulary....

The school climate also responds to increased cultural diversity among students, and to a different sense of "we-ness" among students and faculty: different values, expectations, and perspectives. Schools respond differently to today's heterogeneous student body, as we will discuss below. But regardless of that response, the nature of today's campus community for many secondary schools differs dramatically from that of even the recent past in terms of the cultures, languages, ambitions, and expectations of the student body. Diversity sometimes brings contention among student groups, even in the most supportive campuses. A social studies teacher in a school noted for attention to ethnic diversity says:

> There is a growing trend here at school. It's a militancy among students of color, and I just fear the backlash. A lot of white kids, kids of European ancestry, are afraid to speak up, because they feel they are going to get some kind of verbal or physical backlash.

Sometimes the safety of the campus changes also, for the worse:

> We're having problems here we have never had before. In the past two weeks, there has been a stabbing and a shooting on campus. One of my kids was shot yesterday by a pellet gun...it's getting to be like an inner-city situation.

<u>Dysfunctional student behaviors and activities</u> trouble teachers in all our secondary school sites. Involvement with drugs and gang violence prematurely end the high school careers of many youngsters, especially youth from lower income, urban neighborhoods. In every school, teachers comment on the increasing number of teen pregnancies and the students they lose

either figuratively or literally as a result. A government teacher complained that it is hard to stand up and talk about the Soviet Union "when you have five young ladies who are concerned about who is babysitting. It is difficult to get through about social concerns because they have so many themselves...."

An English teacher's recital of her students' personal problems represents student realities we heard about in many classrooms. Her description is dramatic but not unusual:

> We have a number of students who have emotional problems. Linda has a history of being involved in gang violence. We just recently finished a case of child abuse where one of my students was placed in a foster home after being sexually molested by two older brothers. You may have noticed the kid who is small and has difficulty socializing. He witnessed the murder of his father by his brother. He sits at his desk all hunched into himself. I marked him absent for two weeks straight because he hunches at desk level and I could not see this kid.

Other factors compete with academics. Many lower income youngsters, most especially females, are unable to spend time on schoolwork because of heavy family responsibilities. Jobs take the attention and energy from students of all SES backgrounds, but most especially the less advantaged teen. A math teacher comments:

> There seems to be a general decline every year in the level at which students are functioning. [But what do you expect] when you have students walking in [who] are just totally exhausted because they're working all weekend, or they have worked the night before until 10 or 11 o'clock at night...students that are putting in 30 hours a week just on their work. School takes a back seat real quick.

Mr. Kelso: The kid here is where the problem is today. There's nothing wrong with the curriculum....If I could just get people that wanted to learn, I could teach and everything would be wonderful.

Ms. Corcoran: These kids are just not real smart, a lot of them. And they don't really want to learn. They could care less about school; they're just putting in time.

Mr. Mason: These are kids here who really do want to do a good job, but they have seen so much and heard so much, that it is like they don't know what is right and what is wrong anymore. That perspective is gone. But they are basically really good kids.

Ms. Drexler: My guys. They're very, very brave kids. They are trying to make it, and it is really difficult for them.

Mr. Snow: A lot of the reason these kids are poor achievers is not what a lot of educators say. They are not dumb or turned off or screw-ups. Mainly it is behavior problems, and they have poor study habits, they have poor or counter-productive support at home, lots of time. They bring all of those problems into the classroom and you lose a lot of study and teaching time.

Our interviews with a sample of students and their teachers, and our observations of their classes provide numerous examples of teachers constructing different conceptions of a student, and of the frustration students experience in many classrooms. The teachers quoted above refer to the same youngsters, in terms of their objective characteristics -- ethnic or racial background, SES, family background, and the like. Yet their interpretations of students' behavior and performance, their construction of "student," varies profoundly. Some teachers see today's students as lazy, unmotivated, "bad ass," academically untalented. Other teachers perceive contemporary students as different from

traditional students but nonetheless interested in learning, "good kids," and able to learn.

These teachers reach different assessments and frame different expectations for figuratively the same students. But we also found that different teachers construct different conceptions of literally the same student. Take the case of Johnnie Betts, an African American freshman, a six-foot, barrel-chested young man (Davidson, 1992). His teachers see him in very different terms:

Johnnie's English teacher:

> Johnnie first of all does not belong in a progress (remedial) class. He's too bright, as far as I'm concerned. Anyone who performs consistently this well...he's consistently way above or at where he should be....

Johnnie's social studies teacher:

> He is over-achieving in here. I don't think he is tremendously bright. I think he should probably -- I think if he ever goes into a regular class he will have problems. He is a street smart kid, an [illiterate student] who will do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Observations of Johnnie in the English class showed a bright, engaged student. He readily offered verbal definitions for words, identified authors' use of similes, volunteered to read. Johnnie in social studies sat quietly, and offered little.

Across and within our school sites, we saw that students with similar characteristics, students who represented essentially identical "contexts" for teaching, experienced significantly different school or classroom environments as a consequence of these different teacher interpretations of them as student and learner.

Some teachers say: "These kids are stupid." "They can't do the work; they are troublemakers." "These kids don't care a damn about school." "They are animals." These teachers interpret the problematic attitudes and behaviors contemporary students bring to school and problems with the students and their families, "those families."

Other teachers interpret the objective features of today's students differently. They say: "These kids are really bright, good people." "Once they feel comfortable, it's fun to see them get engaged and turned on." "I really enjoy these students because of their integrity, their honesty." "These kids [the students assigned to basic or low track classes] aren't stupid. In fact they are the best question askers and problem solvers of

all of my students, even those in the AP class. Asking good questions and solving problems, after all, is the only way they can survive." These teachers acknowledge the social pathologies of neglect, abuse, disappearing community and family that affect their students in the classroom, but try to understand their students' attitudes and behaviors in that context.

Among the schools in the CRC sample, teachers responded to the demands and challenges of today's students in various ways. Some have given up, electing on-the-job retirement, and expect little from the students whose attitudes, behavior, or academic skills differ from the students they "used to have." Others have worked to maintain traditional standards and expectations. Still others have changed expectations or practices.

Many of the teachers who have given up or who try to find ways to continue traditional practices see the behavioral and attitudinal problems evident in their classrooms primarily as the students' problems, exacerbated by inadequate school or district discipline or "standards." Teachers who view today's classrooms this way tend to frame solutions in terms of tougher rules and enforcement, rather than adaptation of their own practices or task conception. For example, a California math teacher with more than 30 years' experience believes "...the kid here is where the problem is today. There is nothing wrong with the curriculum." The appropriate response in the mind of this teacher is

> ...to kick butt and take names...be like a drill sergeant in the Marine Corps...the first guy that gets out of line...just give him the bum's rush right out the door....

Likewise, a Michigan physics teacher believes that the problems in the classroom result from

> ...a lack of discipline overall, throughout the school, throughout the district....Educators ought to start exercising control of the situation more...These kids are hurting our programs because of their behavior, attendance,tardies....[I think] we should make an example out of those 50 kids so that the other 1050 will understand that we mean business...that we have some rules and we are going to follow.
>
> Basically...those kids don't fit into what we are trying to do and we don't have the time, the energy, or the money to change our program to suit them...Let's not sacrifice everyone, let's use that little group as an example.... /

Other teachers see the problem as one of lack of fit between traditional practices and the students they serve today. But

beyond this general diagnosis, interpretations and responses differ in critical ways. A few teachers adopting this perspective believe that many of today's students "just can't cut it" and so lower standards, countenance missing homework and classroom inattention, and feel there is "just so much a teacher can do for these students." As a result, the academic value and content of these teachers' classrooms is diminished significantly for students. And these teachers often express cynicism about the efficacy of teaching for "those kids," and tend to disengage themselves as their teaching becomes less satisfying. Students, too, find such classrooms boring. A teacher shared one student's perspective on the question of content and challenge:

> Kids want to be challenged. A kid told me yesterday "I want to be here [in this college prep class]. I would rather learn something and fail this class than be in a regular class again. I'm sorry, but I will drop out of school if I am in a regular class again.

Other teachers cut back on instructional content and the work they expect of their students in an effort to boost classroom accomplishments. In particular, some teachers have given up on homework and focus on accomplishing the important things during classtime. For example an English teacher in Michigan has completely rethought her instructional strategy when the students in her classroom today were failing:

> I was looking over all their failures; it was no homework, no homework, no homework. So I found a book of plays and we started reading plays in classes...got them more involved, participating. I tried to keep written work to a minimum...I am really pleased with the results.

Often, this retreat from traditional academics signifies a well-meaning attempt to structure a classroom environment that today's students will find engaging and non-threatening. However, we saw that in a few cases this retreat of teachers from standards and academic quality unfortunately signaled disrespect or disdain for the students themselves. For example, a California teacher formerly assigned to honors classes and now teaching lower level sections certainly saw things this way as he talked about how the "lesser" students would be less work for him.

However, still other teachers who share the "lack of fit" diagnosis frame adaptation to these "new" students not as "less" of traditional activities but as <u>different practices</u>: instructional content and pedagogy keyed to conventional standards and expectations, but rethought in terms of the needs and motivations of today's students. Teachers adopting this conception of the problem and of their task have made fundamental

adaptations in what and how they teach and in the structure of the classroom. For instance, many teachers frustrated by student absenteeism believe that an effective response lies not in rules and stiff enforcement, but in school and classroom strategies that minimize the disruption and time demands generated by a high level of absenteeism. One teacher says she has learned to put "...all of the lessons on the board [so] whomever decides to show up will know where we are." One school has set up study tables and a peer tutoring program that is available anytime in the day or evening to help students make up missed assignments, and teachers send notices of daily assignments to this central "clearinghouse."

Many teachers attempting to construct different practices believe that today's students require a high level of individualization: "You need to write out notes that Eric needs to do this today, and Scott should be sitting by himself on such and such a chapter, and we need to help Marianne with the research chapter, and...."

A number of teachers have found success with cooperative learning strategies as ways to both attend to individual student needs and to keep the class on track. A mathematics teacher, who commented she would have never believed she would move from conventional teacher-controlled pedagogy, finds success in small groups and encouraging students to help each other:

> I really don't care how they learn it as long as they learn it. I encourage them to work together, I encourage them to talk to other people when they have older brothers and sisters and boyfriends and girlfriends. I don't care. The object is to learn. If someone can get it across better than I can, fine.

Teachers successful in engaging contemporary students in academic work also report rethinking conceptions of subject matter -- moving from canonical view of their subject and its knowledge base to considering broader objectives for learning in English or mathematics or social studies. For example, an English teacher, a veteran of Advanced Placement courses and a Shakespeare buff, outlines her perspective on the value of English for her non-traditional students:

> So, I see my job as really one of the basic level of communication, the correctness of that communication, and hopefully I am able to instill in them enough experiences that they're able to come up with their ideas...give them enough literature that they're able to generate their own ideas in terms of reactions to that literature. And then, hopefully, along the line I can teach them to express those ideas correctly; so that when they get to expressing the ideas, it's done.

> They are indeed actually expressing what they are thinking and able to use language for their own benefit, rather than being used by literature and by the language itself...not becoming a victim to the language. I think my kids feel comfortable enough to speak out and give their opinions.

This conception of English literature as communication, as opposed to English literature as command of Shakespeare, enables flexible response to students' skills levels and interests. It highlights the value of students' views and opinions and stands in contrast to traditional classrooms where mastery of facts define objectives. In these classrooms, students' opinions count for little. For example, an English teacher in another setting told her class:

> Right now you can't give opinions. I noticed you, Andrea, and others have a tendency to answer questions based on what you believe. It's a problem. They don't give a damn about what you think on the Citywides and other tests. (Fine, 1991:38)

A common theme among teachers attempting to revise their classroom practices in light of the needs and realities of contemporary students is the need for personalization -- of seeing students as people, and of letting students see teachers as human beings (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne & Powell, 1991; Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992). An English teacher, whose traditionally low-achieving students produce poetry, literary analyses, and telling essays says:

> I may get a little crazy and silly, I guess, in my classes, but it's not without purpose. Because I think that if they can see me as a human being who's not different than they are, then maybe they can also see that what I am saying and what I'm giving them in literature and writing is not really all that different from what they should be doing. I think it is real important for them to see that literature doesn't have to be a foreign language.

A mathematics teacher whose low track pre-Algebra class is able to construct quadratic equations:

> I think the whole name of the game is getting the kids on your side. To know them and to let them know that you care about what they're doing and that they're not just another body in the seat. That they have their own personality.

A social studies teacher points to the need to find out about possible causes for the negative behaviors and attitudes that students bring to class, and not "punish the victim":

> If I see a kid not developing, I'll get to him and try to find out what's going on. And you might find out that, hey, the kid goes home and gets beaten every night, or that there might not be enough to eat. The point is that because of his environment, he comes to school less equipped than other kids. So should I put him down or call him a failure?

Teachers successful at engaging contemporary youth in learning and academics also agree that the first step to developing effective classrooms for today's students is throwing out traditional practices:

> From the days I went to college, I mean you sit down, you read the book, you do the problems, and you start all over again. I -- you know, I was able to do that and to do it successfully. But I don't think that's the way to teach [contemporary students]. And I don't think that is the way to inspire love of learning.
>
> As time goes by, I have much more tolerance for a lot of things [in my classroom]...for the freedom to be what you are, for the [personal] problems to be what they are. I can accept it and work with it. So it's kind of a, more of an approach to liv[ing] than to mathematics, but it works for math.

A social studies teacher successful with non-traditional students:

> Those people [teachers unsuccessful with contemporary students], they continue to teach in a traditional way. I think they're running head on into a student who is not like the student they taught back in the 60s or 70s or even the 80s. It's a different generation of Americans now, and they are products of the 80s. So we have to deal with them [in different ways].

Using the example of a former gangmember, an angry African American now doing B work in his college preparatory history course, this teacher underscores the importance of changing practices to better match students' motivation:

> In a traditional classroom, I don't think he'd be very successful, because different things motivate him. I look at his report card and I see that teachers who have my style, he does well in. Other teachers who say

> "answer the questions, do the worksheet, dadada," he doesn't do well in.

Contrast this perspective with that of a biology teacher, frustrated with his inability to motivate or engage his class made up of students similar to the student described above:

> [What kinds of things do you think work with these kids?] Paper-pencil work. Paper-pencil work. That way you just kind of keep on top of them all of the time.

Teachers also underscore the need to rethink traditional classroom management strategies in terms of effective responses to today's students:

> Teachers [who are unsuccessful with contemporary students] come in and they try to lecture for 55 minutes to kids whose attention span might be 10. And, the other thing is that philosophy that a noisy classroom is an unproductive classroom. [But you've got to create a different kind of classroom for these kids. They resent traditional teacher-authority stuff.] You know, it's an evolution. It was an evolution for me. A lot of it is letting control go, you know, the control factor. You know, wanting kids to sit-in-their-seats-with-their-feet-on-the-ground, hands-on-the-table type mentality. No way.

Teachers' responses based on these constructions of the abilities and value of their students engender dramatically different outcomes for students. Not only is students' success or failure effected by teachers' classroom choices, the students also take away fundamentally different conceptions of themselves as learners, and of their possible futures. Our interviews with students, particularly those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, reflect that they feel misunderstood, ignored, unvalued, invisible. A high-achieving Latina, angry about what she sees as prejudice toward Mexican students and lack of attention to their success, told us:

> I think my teachers should learn another method of teaching, because the one they use is not very effective. I also would like them to realize we are intelligent, that we can do things, would like them not to discriminate against us, treat us like civilized persons, not like some sort of objects. Also I would like them to give us work and to explain how to do that work well. (Davidson, 1992)

Chester Finn (1987) asserts that students drop out by choice, and that the decision is a rational one. While it is true

that many adolescents elect to leave high school, for many of these youngsters, elements of this "choice" lie in the subjective responses of their teachers to them, their possible futures, and their role as "student." Many of the students failing in traditional classrooms where "standards" are rigidly maintained, bored in dumbed-down classrooms, or who encounter failure after failure, drop out because they see no respect or no future for themselves in the environment. Many of the teachers with whom we spoke were sensitive to the demeaning or nonsupportive messages many contemporary students receive in the school setting.

An English teacher in a school still responding to sudden and dramatic changes in the composition of their student body remarks:

> I am polite to my students. I am respectful of them. I think that's important because if I want them to be respectful to me, I need to show them how to do it. You know, I hear teachers talking in the faculty room about "students don't show any respect, these students are outrageous," going on an on about how disrespectful and rude, on and on about the kids. And then I turn right around and hear that teacher say something which either humiliates or puts down the student and I think, "What's the matter with you? Why don't you hear yourself? How can you turn around and say this child is rude, and you turned around and were rude to him?" To me it's just basic, it's the Golden Rule.

A science teacher in a comprehensive high school says:

> A lot of these kids, we don't realize that no one ever tells them they are good, no one ever tells them. They hear all the time, they hear when they screw up, they hear about it all the time. And a lot of kids continue to screw up because that is the only kind of attention they can get. There's no positive reinforcement.

A social studies teacher in a magnet school that enrolls students from diverse cultures and a broad range of SES notes:

> Sure these kids have an "attitude." But maybe in the school years I can turn it around, an attitude, and say, "Yeah, you got a raw deal, but you're still a good person and I value you. And I want you to be part of my class. Because I am not evaluating you based on the fact that you might be a battered child, or molested, or whatever. That may be your evaluation of yourself, or you may come in here with another set of expectations, but I know you can do these things." It takes a lot of energy.

Teachers such as those who speak on these pages also recognize that what may appear to be poor performance, slowness, or inability to catch on may actually be the manifestation of many years of poor instruction and insufficient grounding in basic skills. Teachers note that "the problems begin in the elementary years, so that by the time they hit our doors, the problems have accumulated." A math teacher stresses the extra determination such youngsters need to succeed in high school:

> Their skills aren't as strong, so it's going to take them twice as long to understand some of the Algebra topic that we have, and it's going to take them twice as much work, I think. And so they are going to have to have even more desire to succeed. It'll be tough.
>
> If they come in with a shaky foundation, I find those students have the most trouble, because they are trying to work with these abstract ideas, while they're also trying to get the basics.

Teachers' interpretations of the objective behaviors, attitudes, and achievements of their students create dramatically different educational settings for students, from classrooms alive with the energy of students and teachers and where students are valued and supported, to classrooms where students are controlled through traditional strategies of discipline and punishment, or even criticism and sarcasm. At the extremes, today's students move from classrooms where hopes for a productive future are nurtured to classrooms where little is expected of them and failure is the norm.

CONSTRAINING MYTHS AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

What factors underlie these subjective responses to contemporary students? Many teachers' subjective responses to the objective realities of today's students are shaped by a number of constraining myths -- half-truths or untruths that form responses to students and classroom choices. Five were prominent in our field work.

1. <u>These kids can't do it.</u> A myth debilitating for both students and teachers is the belief that "these kids can't do it," that the students who display little academic motivation or few abilities as conventionally conceived [the students who occupy the lower tracks in high schools] are incapable of higher order thinking, or critical thinking, or of conceptual understanding.

2. <u>The body of knowledge and skills my students must learn is relatively fixed.</u> Teachers holding canonical views of their subject matter perceive little significant flexibility in

adapting their content or pedagogy to today's students. In this view, there is an agreed-upon body of knowledge that must be conveyed to students; departure from this standard signifies lowering of standards or lesser classroom instruction.

3. Rules and regulations get in the way. This belief holds bureaucracy as villain and sees rules and requirements as inhibiting teachers from doing what they would like to do [or could do] to respond effectively to the needs of today's students.

4. Insufficient materials or resources are available. Contemporary students require resources, such as bilingual materials or special programs, which are in short supply in today's schools and classrooms. Without these special resources, teachers feel hamstrung in responding to non-traditional students.

5. Either I write them off or burn out. Teachers who attempt to develop effective strategies for working with today's students or for responding to their multiple and often difficult needs, feel they are doing the best they can under the circumstances -- that they cannot give any more.

Teachers who subscribed to these views found it difficult if not impossible to imagine another "reality"; they honestly could not imagine anything different in terms of the life or the outcomes of their classrooms. Teachers defined their classroom expectations and practices in terms of these myths as objective facts rather than matters of perspective or interpretation.

Other teachers held different views about their students, their subject areas, and their own abilities to respond effectively to contemporary students. Even teachers within the same secondary school setting differed in the extent to which these perceptions were held as valid and as guides to practice.

What made the difference? Across and within our sample of schools, the character of teachers' professional community -- teachers' up-close workplace setting -- had most to do with how teachers saw their students and constructed their role as teachers. The extent to which teachers subscribed to the constraining myths depended on two factors: the strength of their professional community and the extent to which their professional community reflected these beliefs, or challenged them.

Positive, supportive collegial relations comprise an acknowledged, important role in the Byzantine world of schools where teachers are segregated by assignment and by physical space (See Little, 1982; Grant, 1988; Lieberman, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989 as examples). Yet, beyond breaching professional and personal

isolation, we saw that the nature of collegial relations and the up-close professional community in which teachers operate played a critical role in determining the ways in which teachers thought about classroom practice. For most of the secondary schools we studied, the department was the professional community of greatest significance to teachers' norms of practice, conceptions of task, and their attitudes about teaching and students (Siskin, 1990). Further, we saw that the character of departmental professional community varied significantly within the school. The substantial variation shown for departments on measures collegiality means that teachers literally working across the hall from one another but in different departments experience their workplace in critically different ways. For example, teachers working in the highly collegial English department experience a workplace buzzing with daily conversations of joint projects, new materials to share, and plans for next week, next year, or tomorrow. Teachers in the social studies department, however, interact only in mandated department meetings, where they generally sit in sullen silence through the chair's announcements and pronouncements. So noncollegial is this department, faculty members have been unable to craft within a year a vision of instructional goals to guide the department's response to the new state frameworks. Within-school differences in department culture and collegiality were evident in all but the mission schools in our sample.

The character of the up-close department community -- its norms of collegiality, of practice, or professionalism -- has much to do with how teachers respond to students and how they construct their practice, whether they chose to maintain traditional standards, adjust expectations and content, or attempt to change practices in ways what enhance students' learning and classroom role.

Our 1991 survey data show that professional communities which are cohesive, highly collegial environments are also settings in which teachers report a high level of innovativeness, high levels of energy and enthusiasm, and support for personal growth and learning. Teachers who belong to communities of this sort also report a high level of commitment to teaching, and to all of the students with whom they work.

These features characterize department communities (such as the English department described earlier) where teachers struggle collectively to examine their practices, to devise new ways of meeting today's students' needs, and of supporting one another in efforts to change. In other words, norms of collegiality and collaboration signals more than supportive social relationships among teachers; collegiality, our survey data show, indicates a professional community with norms of innovation and learning, where teachers are enthusiastic about their work, and where focus is upon devising strategies that enable all students to prosper.

Supportive collegial communities, committed to the success of all students, provide conditions necessary to begin to mount collective challenge to constraining myths as explanations for unsuccessful student outcomes or disappointing classrooms.

In contrast to these collaborative communities of teacher-learners, are settings where teachers report strong norms of privacy (and so low collegiality). In these workplace environments another sort of syndrome operates to reify and reinforce constraining myths. Teachers who characterize their workplace in terms of norms of privacy also say that they see their job as routine, their workplace setting as highly bureaucraticized and rule-bound. Teachers who belong to weak professional communities tend to see their subject matter as static or unchanging, and so are unlikely to question the relevance of last year's lecture plans or the conceptions of knowledge or pedagogy learned years ago for today's students.

Teachers describing their workplace settings in these terms are less likely to innovate, to report support for learning. Teachers sketching this profile of their professional community also are more likely to lower expectations for students, especially non-traditional students, and to report low levels of commitment to teaching. Teachers working in weak professional communities subscribe to the constraining myths outlined above.

The co-existence of such oppositional norms of practice and conceptions of students as learners within a single secondary school creates an inconsistent support for students and sends conflicting messages about expectations and goals. Often it is the teacher who holds non-traditional students in the highest esteem and expects the most of them who struggles the most: "Nobody else around here believe in them, so when I hold them to high standards and expectations they feel picked on." A teacher who had worked to move a number of minority students into position for college level classes: "They felt I was being exceptionally hard on them. It became very personalized; it decimated the trust we had built."

They also receive substantively different instruction and exposure to content depending on teachers' views about their abilities and futures. A teacher of a program designed to support the academic aspirations of minority youngsters angrily points out the multiple disadvantage this creates for non-traditional students:

> They're real special kids. They are going to go to college. But I think they've been cheated by the public schools because few of their teachers have ever felt they were worth it. They're going to go with maybe one year's worth of solid curriculum under their belts. They are going with the study skills they learned in

the program, but for the most part they are terribly behind.

Comments about the frustrations of isolation were common in professional communities characterized by norms of privacy. Teachers expressed feelings of having to "do it all themselves" with no help or support from colleagues. A discouraged, experienced social studies teacher grappling with the demands of swift change in classroom demographics observed quietly: "Here you have do to it over and over again, by yourself, and you do it every day, forever. Why did I go into teaching? I don't know; not smart, I guess."

Teachers working in these sequestered and non-collegial settings receive neither challenges to their conceptions of practice and assumptions about students, nor sufficient support for trying to do something different in response to today's students. Teachers working in this kind of professional community tend to stick with what they know, despite lack of student success or engagement, and despite their own frustration and discouragement. These are the teachers who burn out, who believe teaching has become an impossible job, who wonder whether it is all worth it for today's students. Ironically, the absence of a strong, positive professional community has robbed many teachers of control.

Constraining myths steal teachers' autonomy as they locate control in the bureaucracy, in the canons of their subject matter, and in aspects of today's students. Strong professional community committed to creating effective educational environments for all students return the control lost when teachers close their classroom doors to confront the realities of today's students alone. The costs of teachers' isolation in the past, when classrooms in most of America's secondary schools were composed of "traditional" students, appeared to be levied primarily on teachers (Lortie, 1975; Jackson, 1986). Today's classrooms show how real are the costs for students of teachers' professional seclusion.

SUMMARY: COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

Teachers say that contemporary students -- the social values, shifts, dislocations and changes they represent -- comprise fundamental and difficult challenges to their practice, their conception of themselves as teachers, and their sense of professional reward and satisfaction. Today's teachers were not, for the most part, trained to work with today's students. Teachers who feel little support for constructing new responses to students or for rethinking classroom routines from the perspectives of today's students, teachers who feel they are alone in their efforts to respond to today's students, are more

likely to persist in orthodox conceptions of subject matter, to move toward reliance on control and authority as classroom strategies, and to view the "personal problems" of their students as outside their purview.

Teachers isolated in their classrooms not surprisingly feel disengaged, furious, resigned, and frustrated with their work. And in the schools we studied, collectives of teachers were the exception; individual teachers working hard [or just getting by] were the norm (see also Fine, 1991). Today's teachers are bombarded with demands -- the pressures of meeting four or five classes of 30 students five times a week place a premium on just getting by, let alone trying to make some kind of personal connection with 150 youngsters, rethink curricula, experiment with classroom routines, learn more about the cultures and backgrounds of their diverse students, spend extra time with special needs students, or devise ways in which absent students can continue successfully in a class.

The challenges of contemporary students and contemporary school settings in fact represent more than most teachers can respond to effectively. That many [if not most] of the isolated teachers we encountered in the course of our field work sincerely could not imagine another response to today's students, an alternative response to the objective demands of their students, is not surprising.

Yet, the significantly different interpretations of students' objective realities or circumstances associated with the strength and nature of teachers' professional community carry critically different consequences for students. We saw that not only do objectively similar students experience significantly different classroom experiences and messages about self and future and support for development, but conflicting messages and experiences envelop a single student as he or she moves through the day from classroom to classroom.

This subjective diversity in teachers' construction of "student" obviously affects the bottom line of concern to policymakers and the public -- students' academic performance and accomplishment. The moral dimension of these inconsistent subjective interpretations of "student" also cannot be ignored because of the futures and worth they signal for students. Students make sense of themselves and consider their futures largely in the terms that others use to describe them. Many students blame themselves as inadequate and label themselves as failures because of differences in the messages and experiences provided in their school settings. "Objectification" of the "student problem" or the "student context" and educational responses constructed of subjective constraints underestimates the abilities of both contemporary students and their teachers.

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